DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 436 982 FL 026 143

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TITLE Involuntary Language Loss among Immigrants: Asian-American Linguistic Autobiographies. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics, Washington, DC.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO EDO-FL-99-10
PUB DATE 1999-12-00
NOTE 4p.
CONTRACT ED-99-CO-0008
AVAILABLE FROM ERIC/CLL, 4646 40th Street NW, Washington, DC 20016-1859. For full text: <http://www.cal.org/ericcll>.
PUB TYPE ERIC Publications (071) -- ERIC Digests in Full Text (073)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Asian Americans; *Bilingualism; *English (Second Language); Heritage Education; Higher Education; *Language Maintenance; *Language Skill Attrition; Second Language Learning
IDENTIFIERS ERIC Digests; *Native Language; University of California Berkeley

ABSTRACT

This digest draws on a set of linguistic autobiographies written by Asian-American college students in classes at the University of California at Berkeley over the last several years, and examines the pattern of language shift that takes place in the young first- and second-generation student and why this shift takes place. It also looks at the efforts families make to keep their heritage language strong (and why those efforts often do not work) and at those rare people who have succeeded in becoming bilingual, and what happened to make it possible. Specific sections discuss the following: learning English; first language attrition; factors relating to first language retention and attrition; efforts at language maintenance; the University of California, Berkeley environment; and thoughts for future generations. (VWL)

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ERIC DIGEST EDO-FL 99-10 December 1999

ED 436 982

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EDO-FL-99-10 DECEMBER 1999

Involuntary Language Loss Among Immigrants: Asian-American Linguistic Autobiographies

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Despite decades of research findings to the contrary, there is still a common belief that bilingualism is bad for children and unpatriotic, and that the only way to be a true American is to leave behind any other language and allegiance that might be in your background. Children—both long-term Americans and immigrants—often buy into this belief system. At the same time, however, there is a strong feeling among many immigrant families that it is important to preserve ties with the old country and to maintain their heritage language.

It is usually the goal of the parents for their children to learn English fluently and adapt to their host country but not forget their heritage language. To the parents' disappointment (and ultimately to the regret of the child), this goal is only rarely fully achieved. It is commonplace for fluency in the first language to decline as English improves, so that by the end of the high school years, children are at best semi-speakers of their heritage language.

This digest draws on a set of linguistic autobiographies written by Asian-American college students in this author's classes at the University of California at Berkeley over the last several years, and examines the pattern of language shift that takes place in the young first- and second-generation student and why this shift takes place. It also looks at the efforts families make to keep their heritage language strong (and why those efforts often do not work) and at those rare people who have succeeded in becoming bilingual, and what happened to make it possible.

Learning English

The most frequent experience reported by the students in their linguistic autobiographies is that they knew little or no English when they started school in the United States. Many experienced "language shock." As one student reported, "I never expected so much difficulties in assimilating into a brand new culture with a brand new language." None of these students had ever been in a bilingual education program, which suggests that despite all the controversy about bilingual education, true bilingual education programs are rare, at least for Asian Americans. For some students, however, English as a second language (ESL) classes were available in school.

The autobiographies revealed a hodgepodge of approaches to teaching English. Many schools were inadequately prepared for students who needed to learn English, and some bizarre solutions were offered at times: "The only [classes] offered to non-English speakers were ESL for Spanish speakers and Sign Language for the deaf. Since I couldn't be put in the ESL classes, I was taught sign language. That was the only way I knew how to communicate with all the white people who talked so differently than myself. Gradually I began to learn English from my classmates." The other main sources from which students reported learning English were television and friends, but many also reported that family played a significant role.

Television. One student wrote, "Until the age of about four, I spoke entirely in Korean with my parents. Shortly thereafter, I rapidly began to learn English. Television shows like "Sesame Street" and "Mister Roger's Neighborhood" greatly contributed to my learning process. The English sounds that had once been so foreign before soon became my own."

Friends. Friends may play the biggest role of all in helping children learn English. Many students reported consciously cultivating friends who did not speak their language in order to learn English better. "I avoided speaking Korean as much as I could. I started hanging out with people to whom I could speak English."

Family. While some families either cannot or choose not to use English at home, others (as will be shown later) play an active role in their children's acquisition of English. Older siblings are especially helpful in this regard. One student wrote, "I have two older sisters who started school before me, and my oldest sister still has memories of first starting school and not knowing the language. By the time I started school, it is possible that I had already learned to speak English from my sisters who had learned it in school, because I can't remember being teased for not speaking English when I started preschool. Therefore, I am certain I picked up English before I started formal schooling thanks to the precedent of my two older sisters."

First Language Attrition

Although some students are still struggling to perfect their English in college, most of their worst difficulties with the language are behind them. They certainly know English well enough to have been admitted to the University of California at Berkeley. At this point, most of them are dominant in English, and they find that their heritage language has suffered. One student reported, "I noticed that I began to think more and more in English. Now, the only thing that is still Chinese in my mind is the multiplication table. I wish I had kept up with my reading skills in Chinese. It felt as though my Chinese heritage was fading away with my Chinese literacy." First language attrition is discussed in almost everyone's autobiographies. The feelings of reminiscence that develop about the heritage language are discussed in Wong Fillmore (1991), which looks at the age at which attrition in the heritage language begins.

First language attrition may manifest itself in different ways. Many children, for example, have only a passive knowledge of their heritage language. They may reach a point where they understand the home language in a basic way but cannot speak as well as they understand. Others may learn to speak their heritage language fluently but are unable to read and write it.

In other cases, children—and sometimes their parents—speak a mixture of their native language and English. Mixed Korean and English is often called "Konglish," or "Korenglish" as one student prefers to call it—spinoffs on the first word in this genre, "Spanglish." Sometimes, this mixed language actually becomes the main language used at home. "My family and I still speak more English than Hindi at home. We have even developed a sort of Hinglish, which often consists of a mixture of the two languages." In the majority of cases, this is involuntary code mixing—done by people who command one language better than the other—and not the stylistic switching done by balanced bilinguals. Because most of the students who wrote in these autobiographies are only semi-speakers of their heritage language, many report language mixing as the best they can do with their heritage language. This involuntary code-switching is often used with their Asian-language-dominant parents.

Heritage language attrition can create many problems for children who find themselves frustrated, unable to communicate effectively with relatives, alienated from peers in the old country, and humiliated in front of visitors to the home. One of the biggest difficulties that comes with first language attrition is its impact on communication in the family. The parents may not know English well enough (or at all) to communicate on an intimate level with the child, and the child may not have a good enough grasp of the heritage language to bridge this communication gap. According to one student,

> Even with the Chinese I speak, I am limited to the normal yet shallow "everyday" conversations I have with my parents and do not have enough of a vocabulary to have meaningful talks with them. Such was the case just the other night when they asked me what my major at Berkeley was but I did not know the phrase for "Biology," much less, "Molecular and Cellular Biology." The best I could manage was "science" in Chinese and explained the rest in English; I could not communicate to them why I selected this major, what I was going to do with it, and so forth—we ended the discussion by changing the subject.

For many students, parental insistence on retaining the language and values of the old country became the source of intergenerational conflict. "Between my parents and siblings and myself, there has been constant tension—a pressure that is always existent, though perhaps not visible or audibly—for my younger sister, younger brother and me to use Korean among ourselves and with our parents at least when we are in the house. Yet, we neglect it and use the more comfortable English—until we hear another lecture."

Factors Relating to First Language Retention and Attrition

What creates this language shift against the will of the family and, often, to the ultimate regret of the child? This section looks at the factors that tip the balance one way or another toward attrition or retention of the heritage language.

Because use of the heritage language at home is vital to helping children retain it, many parents are faced with the dilemma about whether they should speak English at home. In homes where parents speak little or no English,

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there is no choice but to use the heritage language. However, what happens in cases where parents have achieved some level of proficiency in English? Should they speed their children's English acquisition by speaking it with them, or would that hurt their children's chances of retaining the heritage language? It is clear that children who don't know English suffer emotionally and educationally, at least for the first year or so, and schools often strongly encourage parents to use English at home. Yet, although parents who decide to use English at home may find that their children learn English faster, the student autobiographies reveal that at the same time, knowledge of the heritage language never develops or deteriorates rapidly once English is introduced in the home. All of the students who reported that they retained fluency or near-fluency in their native tongue came from homes where the heritage language was spoken by matter of policy. "Chinese was still the dominant language in our household; English was a forbidden taboo. My parents had wanted to ensure the fact that I would never forget my language and culture."

Many students reported that although their families chose to use the heritage language at home, they found that their children were losing fluency. One maintenance strategy reported by several students was use of the "one parent, one language" approach in their homes. One student wrote, "Gujarati was the first language I learned and spoke fluently until the age of five. At home, my mother would speak to me in Gujarati, and my father would speak to me in English." This is a fairly common approach for families trying to raise bilingual children; it can be a good compromise for families who want their children to maintain their heritage language but at the same time don't want them to arrive at school not knowing English. In one study that looked at the one parent, one language approach, Dopke (1992) found that those families whose children did succeed in maintaining fluent bilingualism throughout the period of the study differed from the others in two key ways: (1) the parents were consistent about the approach and most importantly did not let the children respond to them in the inappropriate language; (2) the children had people besides their parents to talk to in the heritage language. Other relatives or neighbors, or social or religious groups that use the heritage language provide necessary language support that offers both further exposure and motivation to the child. (For more information on the one parent, one language approach, see Dopke, 1992.)

A factor that may be even more important in language attrition than any of the above is language rejection by the children themselves. The children are subjected to tough assimilative pressures at school, mainly from their classmates. They may be made to feel different, and their language or accent may be ridiculed. The children begin to develop a sense of shame about their language and culture and accordingly make every attempt to suppress it.

In a kind of reverse shame, language rejection may also occur or be intensified as a result of discouragement over one's lack of knowledge of the heritage language; non-fluent children try not to speak the language at all for fear of being criticized or laughed at by those who speak it better. For a smaller number of students, language rejection is less emotional and more pragmatic. Students who have lived in America most or all of their lives often simply see no use in using their heritage language.

Efforts at Language Maintenance

When school support for bilingual development is lacking, maintenance and development of the heritage language are up to the family, and success is rare. All in all, it appears that heritage language retention is successful only if the language is used in multiple contexts, which not only allows for sufficient input for continued language development but also helps the child realize the usefulness of the language and provides motivation. When parents see their children losing their heritage language, they often make strong efforts to remedy the situation. The two most common means of trying to stem this loss are increased insistence on use of the heritage language at home and enrolling children in a heritage language school. These schools teach literacy and oral skills in the heritage language as well as values and culture. Children go to these schools after regular school or on Saturdays. For several reasons, however, students write almost unanimously that as children they disliked the Saturday schools and felt they did not benefit much from them.

Many students wrote in their autobiographies that heritage language television was helpful in maintaining or improving their home language. One student wrote, "Television again came to the rescue. It was the medium that led me to become more fluent and confident with Mandarin since most Chinese television shows on TV were spoken in Mandarin."

Having peers with whom one can speak the language is an important factor in heritage language maintenance. Students who grew up in an ethnic enclave with neighbors who spoke their language were much more successful at retaining their heritage language. "Coming from an immigrant family, Cantonese was the first language I learned. My learning was reinforced since I lived in San Francisco's Chinatown and attended a bilingual day care center." Some students belonged to churches or clubs that were primarily ethnically defined. These organizations provided an important social motive for keeping the heritage language strong and more exposure to and practice with the language.

There may be nothing better for family retention of the heritage language than making return trips to the homeland. For most immigrants, this is probably impossible, due to economic considerations or political problems in the homeland. However, some families are wealthy enough to make occasional or even regular visits to the old country. Families able to retain these close ties are those in which bilingualism is most likely to thrive. A visit to the homeland may give many Asian-American children who might otherwise abandon their heritage language new motivation to learn.

University Environment

The University of California, Berkeley, has a richly diverse student body. Campus clubs and nearby church groups allow students to form bonds with people of a similar background. Many of the students in this study found groups of friends of similar ethnic identity and language background, which awakened a new desire to improve their heritage language skills. Also, for the first time, most of them were at a school where their languages were actually taught as academic subjects; it was their first opportunity to take classes in their heritage language.

Many Asian-American students undergo an intense and poignant effort to reconcile the conflicting forces in their lives and find a comfortable sense of identity. Some who have spent their lives becoming as Americanized as possible still feel that racial attitudes in the United States keep them from assimilating completely. The college years are often a time when students begin to look at their heritage identity positively and make efforts to reclaim it. Some strongly embrace their American identity but argue that knowing other languages is not un-American. Students who are still struggling with English most often care more about improving their English skills than maintaining their heritage language. But many who have lost or never attained fluency feel incomplete. Those who are satisfied with their language skills in both languages tend to have a more positive self-image.

Thoughts for Future Generations

While there is a great deal of variation in heritage language fluency among the students studied here and many different views about identity, almost all of the students agree that they want their children to know their heritage language if at all possible. "I'm scared to lose a part of who I am. But more importantly, I realize that I have the awesome responsibility of one day passing on a precious language, that really is more than just a language, to my own children."

Conclusions

The changes in language attitudes that these students report are in keeping with Tse (1998), who discusses stages of ethnic identity formation: (1) unawareness; (2) ethnic ambivalence/evasion; (3) ethnic emergence; and (4) ethnic identity incorporation. Most of the people writing these autobiographies are in stage 3 or 4, but the language journey for these college students is far from complete. Most will probably continue to go through periods when their heritage language is more important to them and others when it is less important. Some will go on to careers where their contacts with the homeland are enhanced or where their heritage language plays a role, others will not. Some will marry people of the same language background, others will not. While almost all of the students write that they hope to help their own children grow up bilingual, we know from past experience that second- and third-generation Americans are increasingly likely to know very little of their heritage language. Either the intergenerational struggle so clear in these autobiographies is likely to be repeated between these students and their children, or the families will surrender to English.

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This digest was prepared with funding from the U.S. Dept. of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, National Library of Education, under contract no. ED-99-CO-0008. The opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of ED, OERI, or NLE.

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